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Serial Selfies

Abstract: *Social media genres are cumulative and serial. Looking at an individual post, tweet, status update or selfie tells us only part of the story. To really understand social media genres we need to see them as feeds and analyse each post or image as a part of a series. This chapter looks at visual self-representational genres that are strongly serial: time-lapse selfie videos, profile photos in social media, and photobooths, one of the closest pre-digital precedents of today's selfies.*

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One Sunday in June of 2014 I wandered through the Elmhurst Art Gallery, a short drive outside of Chicago. Nadine Wasserman and Rachel Seligman had curated an exhibition they called 'LifeLoggers: Chronicling the Everyday'. The walls of one room were completely filled with hundreds of polaroids, many showing the face or body of artist Suzanne Szucs, who took photos every day over a period of 15 years and exhibits the photos in various configurations. Rather than curation, Szucs emphasises quantity and rhythm: a photograph every single day, no matter what. The immediacy of the photos is important, too: Szucs used an instant Polaroid camera and scribbled a few words or a sentence in the white space at the bottom of the photo.

The sheer mass of photographs in the gallery room was overwhelming. Some images were dull or silly: for several days Szucs only took photos of her own face with her tongue poking out. Others are very ordinary: friends having drinks together or a walk in the park. Some photos aim to break with conventional ideas of aesthetics and femininity in the visual, for instance showing Szucs in underpants with the sides of her sanitary napkin visibly sticking out. There are sequences that express great emotional pain after a breakup. An overexposed photo of her face, totally washed out, has the words 'BEYOND HOPE 4/5/05 1 am' written beneath it. The photos are organised in lines downwards, so the following day's photo is beneath this one, and shows a bleak three quarter profile shot of Szucs's face, slightly overexposed against a black background. A blurry selfie just beside it has the words 'Prewashed to limit shrinkage 4/5/05 5:27 pm'. Further over there are more selfies, with titles such as 'broken' (4/22), then shifting to metaphor with shots of her arm on two consecutive days ('The bruise takes on color 4/27/05 12pm' and 'Day 3 – not as bad as I thought 4/28/05 4:10 pm') and a little later, a photo of an empty, untidy bed, titled 'Unrest'.

Szucs's mass of self-portraits cannot be seen today without thinking of Instagram and the millions of selfies posted every day in social media. Szucs began her series in 1996, well before Instagram, but not before many people had begun sharing their lives online, in online diaries and on homepages. The Polaroid photos were already retro when Szucs used them: an analogue version of the filters offered today by Instagram and Hipstamatic.

Perhaps Szucs found the discipline of the daily Polaroid a useful way to keep making art in very small but very constant doses. Decades earlier, poet Frank O'Hara wrote autobiographical poems in his lunch

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breaks, enabling him, according to Todd Tietchen, 'to assert himself momentarily as the protagonist and author of his life events from within the persistent demands (or structuring proclivities) of technical time' (2014, 49). In Tietchen's comparison of O'Hara's poetry to 'situation-based microblogging' (51), he notes that O'Hara's lunch poems are in this respect not dissimilar to 'the 140 characters of the tweet that also make it possible to engage in self-authoring while frenetically involved in our quotidian demands' (49).

Cumulative self-presentations

Digital self-presentation and self-reflection is cumulative rather than presented as a definitive whole (J.W. Rettberg 2014, 5). A weblog or social media feed consists of a continuously expanded collection of posts, each of which may express a micro-narrative, a comment that expresses an aspect of the writer or an image showing a version of themselves. This cumulative logic is built into the software and into our habits of reading and sharing online, and it acts as a technological filter that lets certain kinds of content seep through while others are held back, either never being expressed or finding other outlets (see chapter 2). Szucs's series of Polaroids predates social media, though. She began the series when websites were eternally under construction and the structure of the digital was either hypertextual complexity or peer-to-peer chat spaces and listservs. And yet her project is so akin to today's streams of images, a little every day and the whole consists of nothing more than a potentially never-ending flow of fragments. Frank O'Hara's poems are even more clearly pre-digital. Yet Tietchen compares them to micro-blogging, as O'Hara escapes from the 'technical time' of a disciplined office worker's life to write a little each day. Of course it is easy to see the connections in hindsight, but Szucs and O'Hara also remind us that if the ways we structure our self-representations are technological filters built into our software and machines, they are *also* influenced by cultural filters.

Artists have anticipated almost every form of self-expression we see in digital media. Of course we not only have centuries of diaries and self-portraits, but also have flash narratives that are as short as tweets, photo-copied zines that episodically tell stories from the artist-author's life and artists, like Tehching Hsieh, who have taken photos of themselves every hour for a year.

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It is unlikely that the people who developed Twitter thought carefully about Frank O'Hara's poetry, or that Instagram's developers knew about the daily snapshots of artists like Szucs. Rather, both the artists and the developers create art and tools that respond to the culture at the time. The artists are usually first.

This chapter focuses on a selection of genres of serial visual self-representation online: time-lapse video self-portraits, profile pictures and self-improvement selfies. I also look at photobooths, which are an interesting historical precedent to today's selfies. All these forms emphasise the cumulative, serial practice that underlies most digital self-representations.

Time lapse selfies

On 11 August 2006, Ahree Lee uploaded a video of herself to YouTube. Four days later, 800,000 people had watched it (Washburn 2006). The video, titled *Me*, was a time-lapse video of photos Lee had taken of herself every day for three years. She began the project as a graduate student in graphic design and had exhibited it at several film festivals in 2003 and 2004, even winning awards, but posting it on YouTube gave it an entirely different kind of life as the start of a new genre. On 27 August 2006, Noah Kalina uploaded a very similar video to YouTube that he titled *Everyday*. He had also been taking daily photos of himself, for nearly six years, but only thought of making them into a video after seeing Lee's video *Me*. It was only a little over half a year since YouTube opened up to the public, and the site had skyrocketed in popularity. The web was ripe for viral videos. Kalina's video rapidly became even more popular than Lee's and quickly became the model for hundreds more videos in this genre.

If you use Google Trends to compare the interest in Lee's and Kalina's videos, you see that although Lee's video had a lot of interest just after she posted it, it was rapidly dwarfed by Kalina's video, which is still regularly searched for. Kalina has a Wikipedia page, Lee has none.

We might wonder why Kalina's video was much more successful than Lee's. The videos appear so similar: uploaded to YouTube in the same month by young people in their twenties who had taken daily photos while in art school or graphic design school. In both videos, the face of the artist is centred in the frame, and their faces are expressionless as backgrounds shift and change. Lee writes that she had made a similar video using photos of other people when she was in graduate school for graphic design, and she started the *Me* project wondering

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what such a video would look like if she was the only subject. Kalina had exhibited the photos at the School of Visual Arts in 2003, as a student, and it was seeing Lee's video that inspired him to make the photos into a video.

The current comments on Lee's video suggest that gender and race may have a lot to do with the different reception. There are slurs against Asians and against women ('now do it again with your tits'). Kalina doesn't escape YouTube comment fury, of course ('lol faggot boy what a loser you are noah') but most of the comments on his video are sympathetic. Although they both have expressionless faces, on Lee's video commenters assume she doesn't smile because she's Asian ('Lol she's asian so she looked the same for the whole thing') whereas commenters on Kalina's video ask him 'y so sad' with concern or simply comment 'Poker face.'

Kalina and Lee are of course not the first people to have taken daily photos of themselves. Szucs's daily photographs are one example, but even in the genre of daily headshots there are precedents. Photographer Karl Baden (2007) has taken daily photos every day since 1987 and has exhibited the photos at several places. He now shares them on a blog he keeps for the project. Baden's face has the same lack of expression as in Lee's and Kalina's photos, but where Lee and Kalina shoot the photos in their homes, with various, often messy, backgrounds, Baden always poses in front of a white wall. His photos are all framed identically so that only the head and torso is visible. The shoulders are bare, so while we saw Lee's and Kalina's clothes change with each image, Baden looks the same: clean and contextless except for his hair and the date scrawled at the bottom of the image. His photographs are black and white in a portrait format and apart from the naked shoulders look just like identity card photographs.

No doubt many other artists and photographers have taken daily photos of themselves. I mentioned Eleanor Antin's *Carving*, from 1972, in chapter 1. Antin took 4 photos of herself a day for 37 days while on a diet: one photo showing her body from the front, one from the back and one from each side. The photos show her full, standing body, and her face is expressionless. Antin lost 10 pounds during the 37 days the project lasted, metaphorically carving fat off her own body, but the weight loss can barely even be seen in the photographs.

An important work in the history of serial visual self-representations is Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980–81*, also known as the 'Time

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Clock Piece'. Hsieh punched a time clock in his studio every hour for a full year, and each time he also took his photograph (Miall 2014). The self-portraits were taken on 16mm film, one photograph on each frame of the film strip, so at the end of the year, he had a six minute movie of his face. At the start of the year Hsieh shaved his head, so watching his hair grow as the year progresses is the clearest indication of the passing of time. He always wears the same grey uniform, with his name embroidered on the pocket, clearly referencing the relentless time tracking of the factory worker.

After Lee's and especially Kalina's videos went viral, hundreds if not thousands of similar videos have been posted online, and many of these have become very popular too. People use daily photographs of their own faces, their pregnant bellies or their children to create personal time-lapse videos, and many very clearly reference Kalina's work in particular, for instance by using the same music as he used in their videos. It has become technically trivial to create videos like this. As if digital cameras and home video editing software wasn't enough, websites were quickly dedicated to making it even easier to work in the genre. Dailymugshot.com has apps for your phone to make your time-lapse selfie video even easier to create. Dailybooth.com shut down in 2012, but previously would generate animated sequences from your daily webcam selfies that used the music composed for Kalina's video *Everyday*. Now we use smartphones more often than webcams for our selfies, and there are apps such as Everyday, Selfie Time Lapse Camera and Picr that will remind you to take your daily photo, help you line up your camera so your face is positioned the same in each image, and automatically generate a video of your daily selfies.

Part of the fascination of watching time lapse selfies is watching how the subject changes and eventually ages. In the section about *Me* on her website, Lee compares her video to 'the vanitas tradition of still life painting', writing that 'the ephemerality of physical appearance and the inevitability of aging and mortality' is implicit in the work. Elizabeth Losh notes that Lee's and Kalina's videos are strangely lacking in affect. Their faces are expressionless, the only things that change are hair, clothes and the slow process of aging (Losh 2014). Perhaps this is in reference to earlier artists: Antin and Hsieh don't smile. Neither does Baden. Or perhaps they are attempting, impossibly, to remain constant with the world around us and even our own faces change with the passing of time.

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Not all time-lapse selfies are devoid of smiles and emotion. A moving example is Rebecca Brown's video of photos she took of herself every day from 2007 when she was 14 until 2014, when she was 21. At first she smiles. Her expression changes often, her hair is long and worn in many different fashions and the backgrounds and lighting constantly change. Sometimes there are other people with her in the selfies. She is playful. She holds a hand in front of her eyes in one image and has drawn a moustache on her lip in another. As the years go by, though, her smiles give way to a standard expression: a faint smile that sometimes but not always seems to extend to her eyes. Hair growth and hair cuts are always important in time lapse selfies, but in Brown's case hair is particularly important: she explains that she has trichotillomania, a condition which caused her to lose her hair and cut it short at many points.

Unlike Kalina's and Lee's videos, Brown's video is annotated with short text fragments in the black side bars. We see the years flick by: '2009. 2010. 2011.' Explanatory notes pop up and disappear in turn: 'Diagnosed with depression. Severely Depressed Suicidal. Recovered and Passed A levels. New York 2011! Went to University. Art/Film.' The apparent honesty in these written notes contrasts with the constant slight smile she wears. She looks OK. She looks happier than Kalina and Lee, but far less happy than her 14-year-old self at the start of the movie. At the end of the movie Brown shows an image from each year, moving backwards to the happy 14-year-old. Then she appears in the frame as the young adult she currently is, bright and cheerful with beautiful hair and makeup, in standard video rather than time-lapse animation, and speaks directly to us, inviting us to follow her YouTube channel (click here) or to learn more about trichotillomania (click there). Brown clearly has a purpose with her video. She deliberately uses her self-portrait to break down taboos about depression and mental health, showing her difficult times but also reassuring us that she's doing better now. She includes a FAQ in the info box for the video on YouTube. One of the questions is as follows: 'Q: Where does the smile go? A: Life happens, Depression hit rather hard. I'm on the mend.'

Brown's video is far more playful and, at the start, more cheerful than Lee's, Kalina's or Baden's projects were. Looking at the many time lapse videos parents make of their children growing from babies to teenagers we see the same joy and affect. Search for 'Natalie Time Lapse: Birth to 10 years old in 1 minute 25 sec' (viewed more than eight million times) or another video of a child growing up on YouTube, and you'll see laugh-

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ing, smiling children. Their eyes may be centred in the frame as Lee's and Kalina's were, but these children's hands and mouths move, making it appear that they are eagerly telling us all about their lives.

Clearly the work of artists such as Antin, Hsieh and others anticipates today's selfies. But most people who create selfies today are not aware of these forebears. They may have seen Kalina's and perhaps Lee's videos and have certainly seen videos by others who themselves were inspired by Kalina and Lee. As selfies increasingly become part of our vernacular culture, it is likely that more of us will generate our own time lapse videos in some way or another. At the end of 2013, Facebook generated personalised videos for each user, consisting of photos from their timelines. Perhaps next year we will have posted enough selfies that the annual video will be an automatically generated time lapse video of our own faces.

Profile photos as visual identity

Not everyone takes or shares selfies, but most of us have accounts on Facebook or other social media. One of the first things you are asked to do when you create a social media account is to upload a profile photo. We often use photographs taken of us by other people for our profile pictures, so they are not always selfies, but a profile picture is a visual expression of identity, and our choice of profile photos is clearly a form of visual self-representation. Similar to selfies taken for time lapse videos, profile pictures change over time. Some of us barely ever update them, while others upload a new one every couple of weeks. Like most self-representations in digital media, profile photos are part of a serial and cumulative visual communication.

Profile pictures don't always show a person's face. Sometimes the profile picture marks not individual identity but a connection to a social group or political cause. These can be frivolous, like the little Santa hats various apps can automatically add to your Facebook or Twitter profile photo, or they can be deeply serious. In a study of the Kurdish diaspora's use of social media, Kurdin Jacob describes how her informants post photos of themselves wearing Kurdish clothes and with the Kurdish flag to display their Kurdish identity. Kurdistan is not officially recognised as a nation, but millions of Kurdish people living abroad use photos such as these as a way to show their pride in being a Kurd, to strengthen their shared

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identity with other Kurds in diaspora and as a challenge to Facebook's rule against posting images of the Kurdish flag (Jacob 2013, 65–8).

Icons can be added and removed from profile pictures to mark seasons or events. People add Santa hats for Christmas and flags to show support for their team or country during sports events or for political reasons. Icons or flags are also often used as temporary profile pictures instead of the standard photo of the user's face. After the bomb in Oslo and the massacre on Utøya in 2011, many Norwegians used the OSLOVE icon or a rose instead of their profile image. Another way of using the profile image as an identity marker is by using a photo showing the profile holder with a friend, a child, a lover or a group of friends (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2011). Some users even use a photo of themselves as a child, or a photo of their own child instead of a photo of themselves, in a move that simultaneously anonymises them a little and shows how profile pictures can function as metonyms: this is part of me. Profile photos can change frequently, either as users take new selfies they like, as they use the profile picture to show support for a political cause or a group, or as they find that they are changing and want new representations of themselves.

In an article about Tanzanian students' Facebook profile photos, Paula Uimonen (2013) describes such changing self-representations and how they connect the individual to national and global identities. One of the young women she interviewed used a photo of herself lying smiling in autumn leaves after an exchange year in the UK, clearly showing that she was in a place with a different climate than Tanzania. A while later, she switched to a Tanzanian flag, leaving out her face altogether. Another of Uimonen's informants used a portrait image where the colours of the Tanzanian flag were overlaid on an image of his face, and at another point, an image of his face superimposed on a map of Africa with the words 'Strictly African'.

These kinds of visual identity performance in social media can also be coercive; people can feel pressured into demonstrating a certain group identity. In her recent book *It's Complicated* (2014), danah boyd writes about a young African American from South Central Los Angeles who wrote a college application letter about how he longed to get away from the gangs in his neighbourhood, but had a Myspace account filled with gang-related imagery. The college admissions office contacted boyd, assuming that the Myspace account represented the young man's true identity and asking why he would lie in his admission essay when it was

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so easy to find his 'true' self online. It's not that simple, boyd argues in her book, writing that he probably felt that not to show membership in a gang would be outright dangerous:

> Without knowing the teen, my guess was that he was genuine in his college essay. At the same time, I also suspected that he would never dare talk about his desire to go to a prestigious institution in his neighborhood because doing so would cause him to be ostracized socially, if not physically attacked. (boyd 2014, 30)

In a sense we present a different version of ourselves in each profile picture we choose. In social media we not only present different fronts to different groups of people, as Goffman described in his foundational work on self-presentation (Goffman 1959; Markham 2013a), but we also change our self-presentation over time.

Automatic portraits

Photobooth photos are one of the closest relatives of today's selfies, with their almost-instant production of photographs, the mirror in the booth and resulting photos that often look very similar to today's digital selfies. Although forerunners to the fully automatic photo booths were seen as early as the 1890s (Pellicer 2010, 16), the photobooth was patented in 1925 by Anatol Josepho, and rapidly became a popular attraction in fairs, amusement parks and department stores. As Raynal Pellicer writes in his well-illustrated history of photobooths, fun was emphasised in the advertising of this new technology: having your picture taken was 'no longer a chore – now it's a game', the ads proclaimed.

The surrealists saw the photobooth as a perfect complement to their artistic program. In the first surrealist manifesto, published in 1924, André Breton famously defined surrealism as 'psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought' (1969, 26). Automated self-portraits were a perfect surrealist method, and many self-portraits taken by the surrealists have been preserved. As can be seen in the examples displayed in Pellicer's book *Photobooth* (2010), or on the many Pinterest boards and blogs that host photos of surrealist photobooth self-portraits, the surrealists behaved very similarly to us when they found a machine that would let them take photos of themselves. There are goofy faces, questioning gazes and grimaces.

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But even at this point, surrealists saw the photobooth as a tool for self-exploration. Look at this definition of 'photomaton' written by a group of surrealists for the 15 December 1928 issue of *Variétés: revue menuelle illustrée de l'esprit contemporain*:

> The Photomaton is an automatic device that provides you, in exchange for a five-france token, with a strip of eight attitudes caught in photographs. Photomaton, I've been seen, you've seen me, I've often seen myself. There are fanatics who collect hundreds of their 'expressions'. It is a system of psychoanalysis via image. The first strip surprises you as you struggle to find the individual you always believed yourself to be. After the second strip, and throughout all the many strips that follow, while you may do your best to play the superior individual, the original type, the dark fascinating one, or the monkey, none of the resulting visions will fully correspond to what you want to see in yourself. (qtd by Pellicer 2010, 92)

This testing out of different possible variations of the self is very much present in today's digital selfies as well. Perhaps the reason we feel the need to take another, and yet another selfie, is in part that we as the surrealists wrote in the 1928 never seem able to create a photo that will 'fully correspond to what you want to see in yourself.'

The automation of the photobooth is obviously closely connected to today's selfies, although a selfie with a digital camera allows the photographer far more freedom and aesthetic options than did the photobooth. The analogue, physical photobooth both gave and refused to give the subject control over their own image. As Priscilla Frank (2012) writes, commenting on an exhibition of photobooth art at the Musée d'Elysée in Lausanne in 2012,

> it makes sense that surrealists would be entranced by the photo booth, an automaton that operated independently of human consciousness or human hands. Even the subjects were barely in control of their position, those photo flashes come too fast. The resulting images are pure, independent imaging; the subject is caught in limbo between pose and natural stance. In the endless stream of images, strip after strip, the people themselves lose their humanity and begin to look like automatic images as well.

Of course, although the surrealists and many artists since have used the photobooth for art, the most frequent use of the photobooth was by non-artists, playing around, documenting a special event or a friendship or relationship or simply taking identity photos.

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When you stepped into a photobooth you would draw a curtain to hide yourself from the world. The curious combination of intimate, hidden space within a public setting (often there would be a line of people right outside the curtain, waiting to use the photo booth after you were done) is an interesting counterpoint to the line between public and private we see in today's selfies: the moment of photography is intimate. There is nothing there but the person herself and the machine, the camera. There is no other human to operate the camera or to tell you how to pose or to make you embarrassed – unless the photograph is of several people, which was often the case in a photobooth as it is in today's selfies.

There are Pinterest boards and blogs that collect photobooth photographs of celebrities long gone. Search for some and look at the uncertain gaze of Elvis Presley, Audrey Hepburn, Marguerite Duras and other faces we know better from professional portraits. Elvis seems to be practicing the smouldering gaze he later perfects. Duras looks seriously into her own reflected eyes, as we all do in the mirror. These imperfect, unpolished photos have a sense of introspection that humanises them and reminds us of our own time's selfies.

The serial nature of most digital self-representation is closely connected to the tradition of the diary, which is written bit by bit over a period of time. It is also connected to pre-digital quantitative self-representations, where data is likewise collected and logged over time. In the next chapter, we look at automated diaries that combine the serial with the apparent objectivity of an external device quantitatively measuring our behaviours.

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